

Medical group keeps warfighters in fight
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2/17/2006 - SOUTHWEST ASIA (AFPN) -- The 379th Expeditionary Medical Group Hospital provides medical care impacting missions well beyond its boundaries, helping warfighters stay in the fight in-theater.

Minor shrapnel and gunshot wounds often prevent a soldier from staying in theater while they recover, so they come this hospital to rest and recuperate.

According to Col. (Dr.) Alan Berg, hospital commander, the hospital receives ill and injured servicemembers from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. This helps relieve the workload at forward medical facilities and returns more soldiers to their units.

"A lean but experienced staff of physicians, nurses and technicians all play a vital role in support of getting the warfighter back to the fight, both here and in (Operation Iraqi Freedom) and (Operation Enduring Freedom)," Colonel Berg said.

"If a soldier is evacuated to Germany, they're often sent back to (Continental United States) and do not return to their combat unit. If they come here for treatment, they are more likely to keep a warrior mindset and get back to the fight," Colonel Berg said.

Recently, Army Pvt. Richard Heubach spent several weeks recovering at the 379th EMDG hospital. Private Heubach broke his hand near Mosul and was treated in Iraq with a cast. A week later his Humvee flipped and his splint broke, injuring his hand even more.

The hospital near Mosul treated him with pins to hold the bones in place and he traveled here for convalescent care.

"The staff at this hospital is phenomenal," said the private, who was scheduled to return to the field later this week. "I love the energy here and I plan to keep in contact with the nurses over e-mail long after I leave. They made my recovery a positive experience."

Another patient, Army Sgt. Jamie Hughes, arrived at the hospital after being injured in a weapons cache raid in Ramadi, Iraq. When the sergeant fell from the second floor of a house, he sustained a substantial cut. The 8-inch-long wound required 30 staples to hold together. Sergeant Hughes was treated in Balad, Iraq, and will recover here several weeks before returning to the field.

Not all patients come from the battlefield. The hospital staff also treats Airmen injured locally.

"Most of the time we see a stream of 'walking well,'" said Maj. Christopher Walker, hospital chief of medical staff, referring to patients with minor medical problems.

The family practice doctor from Travis Air Force Base, Calif., compared the 379th hospital to his home unit.

"(The 379th EMDG) is a small boat compared to bigger institutions like Travis, but this makes it easier for us to quickly adapt and respond to diverse needs in an ever-changing environment," he said.

The staff also responds to more severe injuries at the local level.

"Recently, we had a patient with multiple fractures from a vehicle roll-over," said Capt. Peter Weidmeyer, an emergency room nurse. "Fortunately, we were able to see the patient here in a trauma room and surgically repaired her here."

Captain Weidmeyer said once the patient was stabilized, she was shipped to Landstuhl Medical Treatment Facility, Germany, for rehabilitation.

Patient feedback is extremely positive, according to Captain Weidmeyer.

"The majority of the patients are quite pleased with the care they receive," Captain Weidmeyer said. "They enjoy the feeling of our hospital -- it's away from the action, but it's not a typical hospital. We have the feel of an 'out-patient' atmosphere -- as opposed to the intense feeling associated with a major urban hospital on the battlefield."

The 379th medical staff also performs non-emergency surgeries, such as hernias and gall bladder removals, using the latest in laparoscopic techniques.

Laparoscopic surgery is less invasive than a full laparotomy, which involves major surgery into the abdomen. The less invasive approach uses a camera and tiny incisions, allowing quicker healing.

"These techniques cause less pain and allow a soldier to be returned to their unit in a much shorter time than if performed in the traditional manner," Colonel Berg said.

The medics have taken on this additional mission with no compromise to local care, having achieved the lowest disease, non-battle injury rate in the past few years, well below the Central Command average.

"Keeping the base population healthy is the primary reason we're here," Colonel Berg said. "This is our biggest contribution to the 379th AEW's mission."

During the last rotation, more than 120 warfighters returned to the region after receiving care at the 379th hospital, with an 87 percent return to duty rate.

"Achieving this with no additional manpower keeps the medics busy," Colonel Berg said. "We're very proud of our contribution to the global war on terrorism."